

Iraqi Dog's Tale: Safety Officer Brings Military Mascot Home

Contributed by Mike Tharp
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This is a story about woman's best friend.

First, though, a word about the K-9 Corps. Dogs have been used by the American military in World Wars I and II, Korea, Vietnam, Desert Storm and Bosnia. More than 4,000 dogs helped U.S. troops in Vietnam, but only around 200 were returned home, according to the United States War Dog Assn. A 1999 documentary, "War Dogs, American's Forgotten Heroes," claimed that 10,000 American lives were saved in Vietnam by the dogs.

Now, thanks to Safety Officer Susan Tianen, the war in Iraq has bred its own canine hero--Ames Faris. The 5-month-old border collie/hound mix landed Nov. 29 at LAX, fresh off a 26-hour flight from Jordan via Paris. Tianen had been waiting at the airport for hours, and a half-dozen local television stations filmed her reunion with the white-muzzled, black-spotted animal she first met at the Baghdad zoo.

Tianen spent four months in Iraq as part of the Corps' contributions to the Coalition Provisional Authority, becoming known as the Trash Lady of Baghdad for her efforts to help clean up the capital city. It was on a trip to the Baghdad zoo, pinpointed by Amb. Paul Bremer as a rehab target, that she first laid eyes on the puppy that brought her to heel and captured her heart.

Then nameless, the pointy-eared dog lay curled in a cage with two pelicans.

Which leads us to how Muslims in general and Iraqis in particular view dogs.

Simply put, dogs in that religion and those cultures aren't regarded as companions or pets. Modernist Islamic scholars and other commentators have tried to downplay harsher critiques of the animals, and one UCLA professor says the negative view of dogs reflects "the puritans' willful ignorance of Islamic tradition and an oppressive emphasis on law over morality." These moderates even cite a passage in the Koran about Muhammad praying in the presence of his playful dogs, the L.A. Times reported in a 2001 article.

(Turkey has become an exception. Although a Muslim society, it's also a secular democracy, and in recent years, according to a December L.A. Times article, dogs have become popular household pets.)

Nonetheless, throughout the land of the Crescent, dogs are viewed as impure, unhygienic and possibly evil. They can be used as watchdogs but not as pals. Before the latest war, reports surfaced that Saddam's minions were tossing dogs into lions' cages as food—a practice also used against the regime's human enemies.

All of which helps explain why Tianen found her future armpit-nuzzler behind bars in a zoo. Some of the cages housed specific breeds—beagles, sheep dogs—as public exhibits, often held with other species, including pelicans. Coalition authorities frowned on such treatment, so the animals were taken out of the country. Several were clandestinely drafted as military mascots (a general order prohibits that, but soldiers in a combat zone sometimes need an unconditional canine lick), and Tianen liberated the puppy. "Dogs were the only thing the Iraqi people didn't like and didn't want and we did," explains Tianen.

The animal, which had endured daily gunfire, explosions and other wartime commotion, quickly became a therapeutic friend. "On really bad days, I took her over to some soldiers and she spent the night," Tianen remembers. One of those days came when her convoy was attacked and Sacramento District team member Ghassen Khorsorownia was wounded. Ames Faris was waiting for her when she returned from Highway 1. "She served her time and did it well," Tianen says.

She named the dog after a soldier in theater ("Ames") and her friend, a deputy mayor of Baghdad, who was assassinated after she returned to the U.S. Before Tianen left Baghdad, Faris Abdul Razaq al-Assan asked her what she wanted from Iraq. "My dog," she said. Following Faris's death, she wasn't sure what would happen, but a Humane Society chapter in Jordan and nongovernmental organizations banded together to spirit the newly neutered Ames Faris to California. "Over there, you can't bring home unfortunate people or little kids," Tianen says, "and she mattered a great deal."

Tianen estimates that 2,000 soldiers petted the dog while they were in Iraq, and all that attention has mellowed the pup. The addiction to petting hasn't set well with Tianen's other two dogs, Sticks, 5, and Stones, 3, female Jack

Russell terriers who regularly compete in American Kennel Club agility contests. (Leashless dogs must negotiate dozens of obstacles, including tunnels, tires, teeter-totters and water hazards, with only voice commands from their master/mistress.)

Tianen has started drilling Faris Ames on her backyard course in Camarillo, and all three dogs take a 3-mile daily run before Tianen gets home and works with them for another hour. They'll enter the newcomer's first agility drill when Ames Faris turns 1 year old.

To Tianen, Ames Faris isn't just a dog she salvaged from an uncertain fate. "She wasn't a throwaway dog," she insists. "She was a military mascot. We needed something to hug. And she's back now. And she's mine."